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SUBJECT: A SEWER RUNS THROUGH IT: BOY'S DEATH DRAWS ATTENTION TO
CONTAMINATED RIVER

REF: 07 Guadalajara 0076

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¶1. Summary: A child's death after falling into the severely polluted Santiago River in the Guadalajara suburb of El Salto has finally attracted official and popular attention to a long-standing ecological nightmare. But after years of official neglect and indifference, the authorities are seeking a quick fix by covering up the problem, rather than addressing its fundamental causes - an all-too-familiar reaction to environmental crises in western Mexico. End Summary.

A Death in El Salto:

¶2. In early February 2008, eight-year-old Miguel Angel Lopez fell into the heavily contaminated Santiago River while playing with friends near his home in the town of El Salto, the smallest and remotest of the six municipalities that make up the Guadalajara metropolitan area. Less than two weeks later he was dead, with tests at the local hospital showing a high concentration of arsenic and heavy metals in his body. Subsequent tests conducted by the State Forensics Institute failed to confirm the presence of arsenic, but did show extensive contamination by fecal bacteria. Either way, there is strong evidence that the river water poisoned the child.

¶3. The boy's death touched a chord in Mexico's second largest urban area. Local media extensively covered the parents' anguished charges of government indifference to the pollution that killed their son and blamed local businesses for contaminating the river. For several weeks the story was front-page news and a steady stream of citizens vented their outrage in letters to the editor and on local talk-radio shows.

State of Denial

¶4. The initial reaction of the authorities was tepid. Governor Emilio Gonzalez Marquez expressed sympathy for the parents and declared "we are all responsible" for the lamentable state of the Santiago River. Javier Gutierrez Trevino, President of the Jalisco Council of Industrialists, leaped to the defense of the private sector, declaring that he would drink a shot of river water to prove it was not contaminated with industrial residue. Jalisco's Secretary of Health downplayed the pollution risks, and malicious rumors circulated from various sources that Miguel's death was really caused by domestic abuse, rather than toxic water.

The Tragic Truth

¶5. These remarks served only to inflame public opinion still further, and helped keep the story alive. Press commentators dismissed the government's statements, noting that the governor had diffused responsibility so broadly that no one could be held accountable. The El Salto Chamber of Commerce undercut Gutierrez Trevino by acknowledging that less than half of the businesses in town had any kind of wastewater treatment system, and the media continues to hound him to carry out his ill-considered boast. Municipal authorities admitted that none of the millions of gallons of sewage dumped into the Santiago watershed from the metropolitan area are treated or cleaned in any way. Local farmers indicated that crops such as wheat will no longer grow close to the river because of the contamination. In one poll, 40 percent of El Salto residents claimed to suffer adverse health effects from the river.

¶6. As the media clamor grew, official fingerprinting began in earnest, with local, state, and federal entities scrambling to avoid blame for the situation. The state's failure to utilize a credit line for building wastewater treatment plants offered by the Government of Japan in the late 1990s came in for particular criticism, with the ruling PAN and opposition PRI parties accusing each other of neglect and obstructionism for allowing the credit to expire unused. Delegations of officials and politicians trooped out to the banks of the Santiago, where their remarks tended to be long on rhetoric and short on concrete ideas.

Covering Up the Problem

¶7. The only "solution" announced so far by the Government is a plan to bury 3.5 kilometers of the Santiago River in large steel pipes underneath the most heavily populated areas of El Salto, to prevent more accidents of the kind that cost young Miguel Lopez his life. Construction has already begun, and the

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authorities hope to finish the project by the end of April. At that point, while the river will be out of sight for a small portion of its length, its toxic waters will continue to flow untreated downstream. The Governor also announced his intention to pursue construction of a wastewater treatment plant, but the director of the state Water Commission admitted it would be 2011 at the earliest before a facility could be operational.

River of Death

¶8. The 433 km long Santiago River begins in Lake Chapala and flows northwestward through Jalisco and Nayarit states to the Pacific Ocean. With the exception of the area around Guadalajara, and a large hydroelectric dam in Nayarit, the lands it passes through are not highly developed. The El Salto segment of the river is by far the most polluted, and the toxic mix of sewage, industrial waste, and agricultural run-off threatens to contaminate other ecosystems hundreds of kilometers downstream.

¶9. The Consul General visited El Salto and the riverbank on March 7th. The putrid smell was nearly overpowering and permeated several blocks beyond the river's edges. Rusting 55-gallon drums with unknown contents floated in the evil-looking black water. Grayish-white foam covered the riverbanks below the town's namesake waterfall and drifted slowly downstream, 100 meters from an elementary school. El Salto's Mayor, Joel Gonzalez Diaz, told the CG that during times of high water in the summer and fall, the noxious smell penetrates the entire downtown area.

¶10. Mayor Gonzalez (no relation to the Governor) is in a difficult position. The dimensions of the ecological

catastrophe are far beyond the resources of a small municipality to handle. As the only PRI mayor in the metropolitan area, he has had a difficult time with the PAN-led State Government; he was publicly told to "buzz off" by the Governor when he asked for additional state resources six months ago. Nevertheless, Gonzalez hopes to convince his fellow mayors to address the problem as a regional threat affecting the entire area.

Comment: A Tarnished "Pearl"

¶11. The tragic state of the Santiago River is not a new development; the contamination is the result of years of neglect by federal, state, and local authorities. No one has ever been held accountable, and not one business has ever been sanctioned for polluting the river. It took the death of a child to finally galvanize the government into action, and even then, it remains to be seen whether the authorities will simply bury the problem without addressing its fundamental causes.

¶12. This is not the only environmental crisis that is causing Guadalajara's image as the "Pearl of the West" to lose some of its luster. Increasingly severe air pollution that sometimes exceeds Mexico City levels (reftel) is another concern, as is the loss of open space and parkland to development. Growing traffic congestion, the contamination of some local beef with the chemical clenbuterol, and the destruction of mangroves in coastal nature reserves are also worrisome. The environment has never been a priority for Jalisco's governments, and the state's Environment Secretariat continues to receive a miniscule slice of the official budget. Post will do what it can to assist and focus official attention on this subject, particularly during upcoming Earth Day events.
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